Bernhardt OK'd as Interior chief

- DENNIS WEBB

A man with Rifle roots will serve as the next secretary of the Interior Department following a 56-41 Senate vote Thursday.
The Senate's confirmation of Acting Secretary David Bernhardt, who grew up in the Rifle area and now lives in Virginia, comes amid considerable debate over his track record when it comes to policies and compliance with ethical standards as deputy secretary under former Secretary Ryan Zinke, and then as acting secretary.

U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., voted against Bernhardt. He said in February that he couldn't support Bernhardt due to his work to revoke Bureau of Land Management methane rules for oil and gas production, to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to drilling and to limit input from state and local officials on oil and gas leasing.

The Republican National Committee said Thursday that Bennet's vote marked the first time a U.S. senator from Colorado has opposed an Interior secretary nominee from Colorado. Research by the office of U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner, R-Colo., indicates six people who live in Colorado or at some point lived in Colorado previously have served as Interior secretary. The most recent are Ken Salazar during the Obama administration and Gale Norton during the George W. Bush administration.

Like Salazar and Norton, Bernhardt is an attorney. He served in several Interior Department positions during the George W. Bush administration, including in the high-level position of solicitor, serving as legal counsel to the department.

Bernhardt also has worked as an attorney and lobbyist for Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck. He was a shareholder in the firm, running its natural resources practice, and represented oil and gas, water and other interests. Ethics concerns surrounding his nomination have focused on former clients said to have benefited from Interior Department actions during his leadership, and on whether he has always recused himself where warranted in keeping with ethical guidelines. Bernhardt has maintained he has complied with ethical standards, and says that at the Interior Department he works on behalf of the American people.

Democrats Joe Manchin, Kristen Sinema and Martin Heinrich and Independent Angus King joined Republicans Thursday in voting to confirm Bernhardt.

In testimony on the Senate floor Thursday, Gardner said Bernhardt has been the victim of "the Washington, D.C., political smear machine" and the opposition to him isn't really about things such as ethics and integrity.

"It's about that he has been and will be effective at implementing an agenda that the other side doesn't agree with because they know he will be effective at protecting our great outdoors and public lands," Gardner said.

Kelly Nordini, executive director of Conservation Colorado, said in a statement that Bernhardt's Colorado roots don't give him special qualifications to run Interior, "and shame on Senator Gardner for letting the fox guard the
henhouse simply because he's from the same neighborhood. Senator Gardner made a huge mistake with his vote (Thursday), given Bernhardt's troubling record and spiraling conflicts of interest. Westerners love their public lands and the environment and Bernhardt cannot be entrusted to protect them on our behalf."

U.S. Rep. Scott Tipton, R-Colo., said in a statement that Bernhardt is "a career advocate for responsible multiple use of our public lands," has shown dedication in his roles as deputy and acting secretary, and is well suited for his new role.

"I am excited to continue working with him on public lands issues. I thank the Senate for a quick confirmation and wish David well in his new full-time job," Tipton said.

Anna Peterson, executive director of the Mountain Pact, an organization working with more than 50 mountain communities in 11 Western states, said in a new release, "Western senators who claim to support our American public lands heritage cannot legitimately support David Bernhardt."

She cited his involvement in actions such as revising conservation plans for greater sage-grouse and reducing the size of the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments in Utah.

Bernhardt said during his confirmation hearing that the greater sage-grouse plan revisions have the support of Western governors, and that Interior has been implementing Trump's vision for the department and "working to reduce unnecessary burdens without sacrificing environmental outcomes."

Bernhardt attended Rifle High School in the mid-1980s and was active in drama, football and other activities there, but left the school early to get his GED and attend the University of Northern Colorado, where he got a bachelor's degree in just three years before going on to law school.

Bernhardt is widely lauded for being hard-working and highly intelligent. He worked for Mesa County Commissioner Scott McInnis when McInnis was a congressman, before joining the Interior Department after Norton became Interior secretary.